

Experimental documentary: introduction

by Chuck Kleinhans

In August, 2009, Professor Michael Renov of the University of Southern California and I co-chaired a panel on experimental documentary at the Visible Evidence conference. VE is the premier international academic conference on documentary film. In organizing a panel on experimental work, Renov and I wanted to direct attention back to what had become a somewhat neglected area: films and videos which used innovative forms to challenge taken-for-granted aesthetics as well as social issues. Just as with other areas of media in a market culture, documentary tends to drift into the comfortably predictable and conventionally bland, be that in cable TV, PBS and network broadcasting, or theatrical features.

A filmmaker friend, Fred Barney Taylor, director of [*The Polymath*](#), told me of working on a cable channel series and being scolded by a network suit: “You have to learn to make films that people in trailer parks will want to watch.” Which didn’t mean topics, but following the rigid one cable hour = 43 minutes of creative stuff in between commercials, or about five sequences with a dutiful narrator introduction explaining what would be seen in this segment, ending with a just as banal wrap up of what was seen and a lead into what would be presented after the commercial break followed by more of the daisy chain of narrator voice summary. Visuals? unimportant illustrations of the verbal script.

The (yawn) formulaic nonfiction work that appears on public television and the ever-more-dismal networks is hardly any more challenging, and tip-toe cautious about any “sensitive” issue. But the impulse to take on big issues by displaying big egos isn’t much of an improvement, as seen in the mega-trend of feature length quasi-comic social and political issue documentaries first provoked by Michael Moore and more recently taken over as a form but channeled into a new Right wing activism, as in the fake “exposé” of the anti-poverty activist group, ACORN.

The Moore model uses rapid fire shock tactics, self congratulatory pranks, off

the cuff analysis, and thoughtless media making without an analysis of how, and where, and why the finished product fits into the practical social political movements at hand, their state of development, and their needs and resources. The result has been, on the left and more recently on the right, a string of poorly conceived, formulaic, and essentially wasteful films. But they create a model that then led aspiring documentarists to make work that has no chance of getting multiplex exhibition, and then become extinct artifacts of the movements they claim to represent.

In contrast, the films discussed here have a different agenda, different forms, and different means. These makers think that new realities and new issues require new expressive forms to connect with audiences. And that connection operates in provoking a deeper, more reflective engagement than the “ha ha” of the passing fancy. The issues continue with papers s from a panel on *Standard Operating Procedure* given at the Society for Cinema Studies meeting in March 2010. We’d also recommend an issue of [*Millennium Film Journal*, no. 51](#) (Spring/Summer 2009), guest edited by Lucas Hilderbrand and Lynne Sachs on “Experiments in Documentary” for additional thoughtful discussion of these issues.

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